

The first Doctor Who comes to video

Fans of the cult science fiction television series *Doctor Who* are in for a treat this month with the release on video of the very first episode ever to be televised.

It was on the evening of November 23, 1963 when the much-missed William Hartnell first appeared as the incarnation of the time lord from another civilisation on his first earthly visitation. Twenty seven years, six actors and 28 travelling companions later, Dr Who is still the most loved hero of the science fiction genre today. According to BBC figures, *Doctor Who* is now watched by 110 million viewers in 70 countries.

That first episode, shot in classic black and white, is called *Doctor Who - An Unearthly Child*. It introduces viewers to the time traveller and his grand daughter, Susan (Carole Anne Ford). On a visit to 1963 Britain, she has become a pupil at an ordinary school. A strange amalgam of teenage normality and uncanny intelligence, she whets the curiosity of two teachers who become inextricably involved in the Doctor's strange travels.

That premiere episode in the *Doctor Who* saga was the first of a new kind of programme from a new kind of BBC which emerged in the early sixties. With the arrival of competition in the form of the British independent broadcaster, ITV, the BBC soon realised it must re-arm itself with new programming if it was to survive. Among the new programmes which



emerged from the shake-up were the drama series, *Z Cars*, the comedy series, *Steptoe & Son*, and of course, *Doctor Who*.

The latter was created by Sydney Newman, a flamboyant Canadian who was brought in the reorganise the BBC's drama department. Newman modelled *Doctor Who* on H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, replacing Wells' nameless traveller with an equally mysterious wanderer known only as the Doctor.

Doctor Who not only stretched writers' imagination, it also pushed at the frontiers of television technology. Its distinctive title sequence of swirling clouds was produced by camera feedback and its equally distinctive theme music, of white noise and electronic warbles, was the product of the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop at its most experimental. So popular was the theme, it was released as a single and made it into the top ten record charts in Britain, Canada and Australia.

Though today's programmes follow essentially the same pattern set by those pioneer episodes, many visible changes have occurred. The Doctor himself has undergone six 'regenerations' to be played by William Hartnell, Patrick Troughton, Jon Pertwee, Tom Baker, Peter Davidson, Colin Baker and Sylvester McCoy. Behind the scenes changes have been reflected in the differences in the series' pace and style. The Doctor's adventures have ranged from historical drama to gothic romance and from *Star Wars* space opera to outrageous comedy. In

fact, the only constant feature of the series has been the Doctor's time machine, the Tardis - an acronym for Time And Relative Dimensions In Space. Although its larger-than-the-outside interior has undergone numerous re-fits, its exterior, on the whole, has remained shaped like a blue, London police box.

Only once - in 1970 - has *Doctor Who* ever been threatened with cancellation. Thought to be dated and childish, it was told to grow up or get out. The production team decided to combine many of the elements that proved popular over the years. The new Doctor Who, played by Jon Pertwee, was given an adult job as a scientific advisor, a straight-laced assistant, Liz Shaw (Caroline John) and a souped up car, WHO 1, which was affectionately known as Bessie. The changes did the trick and the series has never looked back.

Whatever pleasure viewers derive from *Doctor Who* today, they are somewhat different from those early days when it was watched from behind the sofa, between the crack in the door or through the keyhole by a generation of terrified school children who had never before been exposed to such frightening goings-on.

As the show's continued popularity proves, it has been the flexibility of format that has helped ensure its continued survival. With the Daleks, Cybermen and the Master all proving equally durable, it looks as if we're in for another 27 years of time travel.

